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Technology-Rich Learning

The Kindle Goes to High School

Lynn L. Rudd

Teachers who used e-readers in high school classes saw reluctant readers make a U-turn in their attitudes toward reading.

"I'm starting to read a lot more. In the past, I didn't care about reading and I thought it was boring."

—10th grader

"Every time I picked up my Kindle and read, I felt better about myself."

—10th grader

During the 2011–12 school year, 16 teachers at Canton McKinley High School and I set out on an adventure to learn all we could about integrating the Kindle e-reader into our classroom activities. The experience was invaluable for the teachers, for me—as a literacy coach at the time—and for students. Through a partnership with eTech Ohio and Walsh University, our school received 75 Kindles with keyboard functions and a small amount of money to purchase high-interest books accessible on our Kindles.

We launched this pilot because, as social studies teacher George Antwi-Obimpeh stated, "We no longer have classrooms filled with 20th century learners." We have learners who expect to access and manipulate a text within minutes after they discover a title that interests them.

Because there is little information regarding using Kindles effectively on the high school level, I asked these teachers to reflect on their experiences using a Kindle in school to share what they learned with others who might be interested in using Kindles in class. All 16 teachers who opened up their classroom practice to incorporating Kindles contributed their ideas to this article.¹

Advantages of Kindles

We discovered Kindles had many advantages connected to how 21st century kids prefer to read.

Differentiated Texts

Most teachers agreed that the biggest advantage this device offered was the ability to provide many different texts and to differentiate texts according to students' reading abilities and interests. English teacher Tiffany Grimsley had incorporated sustained silent reading into her classroom for a number of years but still struggled to get some students engaged. These "bookless" students gravitated toward the Kindles; ultimately, they all found something to read on the device that intrigued them. "Students were drawn to the high-interest books that we downloaded on the Kindles," Grimsley explained. "Several students finished reading their first book ever on the Kindle and have started their second."

Grimsley had found it time-consuming and costly to continually add to her collection of high-interest books. The Kindle provided more options at a lower cost. Because the Kindles were all registered under the school name, each high-interest title could be shared among five devices. This allowed many students to read a popular book at the same time, which led to more conversation and discussion as part of reading activities.

Science teacher Jean Cyders saw another advantage. "There's no fear of another teen seeing you reading a 3rd grade lexile book," Cyders said. Having seen many students suffer embarrassment in previous years, Cyders was excited about this opportunity for struggling readers.

Built-In Comprehension Tools

Kindle tools offered a way to electronically highlight or annotate text as well as a text-to-speech function. Several teachers pointed out that the built-in dictionary was an excellent way for students to build their vocabulary.

Psychology teacher Melissa Hadnett integrated an article downloaded onto the Kindle into her classroom activities. Once her students learned how to use the tools, some of them used the highlighting and note-taking functions as they read the article and later referred to notes in discussions. Although the teachers had a bit of trouble note taking and highlighting with the electronic text, Hadnett's students seemed comfortable with the practice.

Pat Wohlfarth, who teaches learners with a variety of learning disabilities, had great success integrating the text-to-speech function into her instruction. By following along as they heard the words read aloud, students with learning differences could "read" and comprehend high-interest, current texts that their peers were discussing, without feeling at any disadvantage. These learners could also change the font size on their individual devices according to their specific needs—again, privately. Wohlfarth is excited that students can use the Kindle in their leisure time to experience, without frustration, the books their peers are reading.

Going Green

Scott Lowry, a science teacher, pointed out that integrating the Kindle is environmentally friendly. When teachers are trying to offer students a variety of texts, it's difficult to avoid a lot of photocopying. Downloading PDF versions of articles or whole issues of magazines onto students' Kindles eliminates the hours and expense of making multiple handouts. Math teacher Jeff Twiddy downloaded worksheets from his online math site for his students—they didn't even have to get online.

As might be expected, the teachers had to coordinate using the Kindles and allocating time with them fairly among their learners. I kept an up-to-date schedule that reflected teachers' plans for using the devices. Because teachers were all at different stages of expertise and confidence with the Kindles, they could collaborate quite well in terms of when each teacher would use them.

Hurdles

Although we saw exciting advantages to Kindles, there were hurdles.

Lack of Server/Technology Support

Our most significant hurdle was that our district's server was unable to support the additional devices so we couldn't go online with the Kindles. Our server, as in many districts, was already burdened with the number of computer labs and technology needed for career tech and math and science classes, and our information technology department wasn't open to servicing the Kindles because they didn't align with an approved technology list.

On the plus side, this discouraged students from off-task activities; but on the minus side, it made downloading books and magazines difficult and time-consuming. Teachers had to download all online materials offsite or through a small, wireless device brought by a graduate student who worked with us through Walsh University. With the university's cooperation, we were able to overcome this hurdle.

Logistics and Training

Teachers noted practical problems of storage and upkeep. Many didn't have the space to store multiple Kindles nor the time to make sure the devices stayed charged or to download necessary materials. I attempted to solve these problems but ran into logistical dilemmas; I couldn't get online at the school, and these tasks took many hours.

Logistics were compounded by the fact that we only had 75 Kindles available for 16 teachers. It was difficult to make sure each teacher had access to a device when he or she needed one, but because the teachers understood this demand, we all collaborated to best use the e-readers. Without a scheduler, it would have been difficult to balance everyone's needs.

Science teacher Chrissy Polewan expressed the need for training for teachers who wanted to use Kindles. Because of the timing of the grant and various scheduling concerns, teachers didn't, in general, receive sufficient training.

Students' Lack of Ease

Computer applications teacher Deborah Henniger reflected on a different kind of hurdle: *students'* discomfort using an e-reader for high-level work. Henniger and I downloaded a business magazine that seemed applicable to her class. She asked her class to read three short articles and complete a reading guide for each one. Although we gave a quick tutorial on using the Kindle and helped students find the articles within the issue, the combination of this technology integration and the demands of the workplace language in the business magazine confused and overwhelmed students.

We'd hoped this activity would both introduce students to Kindles and integrate workplace texts into their schoolwork. Reflecting on the experience, we realized that although many adolescents are tech-savvy, some still only use technology for social endeavors. Many kids in our urban school had never used an e-reader. We should have first provided practice on the Kindle with a less demanding article and, once students were comfortable with the technology, moved on to the higher level of reading.

Graphics and Formatting

Downloading and using resources that featured extensive graphics was frustrating. The Kindle we used just couldn't support that material. Even after formatting documents through the Calibre program, documents were often unreadable, or their formatting was difficult to navigate. Fortunately, teachers attempted these downloads outside the classroom so students didn't experience frustration and fatigue; however, many teachers did. Ironically, many of our students are used to the flexibility, immediacy, and touchscreen capabilities of smartphones. Some talked about our Kindles—which had black and white displays and no touchscreens—as "old school."

The Need to Buy Texts

Once the initial excitement wore off, teachers realized that having the devices was only the first step; they needed to find interesting, engaging resources for the Kindles. This required money. Because of our inability to download materials, we were left with buying what we could through the Kindle store. We spent many hours searching for current, appropriate books and materials in the free area of the Kindle store.

Beyond "Old School"

"I have noticed that my reading has improved. It is ... stronger and more fluent."

—10th grader

"I finished the first book that wasn't assigned in English class!"

—10th grader

Teachers at Canton McKinley remain committed to pursuing the advantages of Kindles. It was rewarding to buy just-right books for the Kindles and put them into students' hands. Although many of us are old school and prefer to read, annotate, and think with hard copies, our students may be hardwired for something different.

Endnote

¹ The following teachers contributed to this article: George AntwiObimpeh, Jennifer Cleavenger, Eli Coulas, Jean Cyders, Tiffany Grimsley, Melissa Hadnett, Deborah Henniger, Diana Iacino, Marisa Jones, Patti Kolias, Stephanie Lepley, Scott Lowry, Chrissy Polewan, Jeff Twiddy, Marilyn VanAlmen, and Pat Wohlfarth.

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